

**THE WORLD'S HAPPIEST LUNATIC:
An Interview with DR. LAWRENCE J. LEE**
Interviewed for the NNP by Greg Bennick

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This is an interview with Dr. Lawrence Lee about both his ideas around numismatics and academia, and perspectives on historical analysis through coins. The interview was conducted in parts via phone, so no video exists, and editing together audio would have been choppy sounding at best. This transcript is an accurate representation of the whole interview experience. Thank you for reading! -GB

GREG BENNICK: Hi, everybody. This is Greg Bennick with the Newman Numismatic Portal, and I am here today to conduct another interview, this time with Dr. Lawrence J. Lee, museum curator, and I will be referring to Dr. Lee today as Larry. This is a casual and fun conversation about his background and connection to the coin hobby. Larry, how are you doing today?

DR. LAWRENCE LEE: Hey, Greg. How are you doing? Thanks for inviting me.

GREG BENNICK: Absolutely. Well, let's start off. Just give me a little backstory about your connection to the coin hobby. Have you always been a collector? Have you always been a researcher? A little bit of both? I'd love to know.

DR. LAWRENCE LEE: Well, on my business card, I claim to be a professional numismatist, as I see there being a gradation between the coin collector, who is a hobbyist, and the numismatist, who is the scholar and who realizes that knowledge is important. The main difference is, to me, hobbyists usually don't buy many books besides *The Red Book*, whereas the more interested you become in numismatics or a subset thereof, the more numismatic books you have. You start becoming more and more of a numismatist rather than a hobbyist. So, I see it as a gradation, and so that's why I self-proclaim to be a professional numismatist.

GREG BENNICK: That's great. So, you've been a collector historically. How did you get your start in coins?

DR. LAWRENCE LEE: Well, I am the template for the 10 to 13-year-old boy who, just prior to puberty, some way or another becomes interested in coins. In this case, my grandmother's little box of pennies. And there was a 1916-D Lincoln cent in there that was bright and shiny, natural mint luster, I later learned. It was very high grade.

At any rate it was neat and it caught my attention. I wanted to know more and because I lived in Denver: I knew the D on it stood for the Denver mint. But it wasn't just a situation of let me quickly accumulate and fill a blue holder and start pushing these coins in one at a time and get my date run complete. It was more that I was interested in, well, since Denver has a mint here, finding out what minting was about? I became interested, not so much from the investment strategy standpoint, but, as it turned out, interested in it as an academic discipline.

GREG BENNICK: So, your start, right off the bat, was as a researcher, a student of the hobby beyond just the collecting standpoint.

DR. LAWRENCE LEE: Yes. Then interestingly, my father was an artist, a commercial artist, but in his heart, he wanted to be a fine artist. He contracted to do some background work at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science. He was working in the Australian outback section of the diorama, which was about an 80-foot-long section, in front of which they would mount animals.

I can just remember seeing him sitting on a stool, painting shrubbery way in the background of this diorama. It was just really cool to be in a museum after hours and see what was going on. So that museum, the Denver Museum of Nature and Science, which I went to many, many times as a child, ultimately - my most recent publication is a publication of the Indian Peace Medals that are in that very museum. So, I kind of came full circle with that.

GREG BENNICK: Obviously curation, in a sense, is essentially in your blood.

DR. LAWRENCE LEE: Well, I would say to a certain extent, curation is in every collector's blood. To curate means *to care for*. To be a curator means *to be the caretaker for*. And so, all collectors, to a certain extent, have their own mini museum where they are the curator and they care for their own collection. They keep track of where they got the item, the extensive records, the provenance, where they got it and how much they paid. They're basically duplicating what museum curators do on a professional level for other people's collections. So being a curator, I do have it in my blood to the extent that I believe collectors are born, not made. Basically, the collecting gene is a part and parcel of who and who collects what.

If you look at any mailing list or membership rolls, they show that 90% of all coin collectors are male. It's not that there's not female collectors. But in general, women, if they collect, don't necessarily collect coins. I'm probably on dangerous ground here.

GREG BENNICK: I mean, realistically, the hobby is replete with men. It is predominantly men and efforts are made continually to change that. I know Women in Numismatics was the name of the group that Charmy Harker was running for a while. Efforts are always being made, but definitely men gravitate toward the hobby more, it seems.

DR. LAWRENCE LEE: What I'm arguing is that it's genetic. Collecting is genetically inherent. Men tend to like coins more for maybe reasons of history, maybe reasons of wealth and accumulation. Consequently, the pattern is generally: they get into it, boys do, and they have the coin bug until puberty. And then they discover girls and they leave it. They quit doing it. Later in life after the family nest is empty, they're 40, they're 45. They now have discretionary income. Now, those are the guys if the ANA or the ANS or whoever, I think if you're going to target someone, you don't target the 13-year-old kid who's about to lose interest. You target the 45-year-old guy who collected coins way back when and, you go after him.

GREG BENNICK: The idea of targeting 40-year-olds with discretionary income is pretty interesting. So, you've written about the, and I'm putting this in air quotes as I say it, "the myth of

the young numismatist” and the title is provocative since a lot of emphasis, of course, is placed on young numismatists as the future of the hobby. There are so many young numismatists in the hobby today and its very encouraging. Is that what you're talking about with the myth of the young numismatist, meaning that we should be targeting older individuals in terms of bringing them into the hobby for the importance of the future of the hobby?

DR. LAWRENCE LEE: Yes. I'm saying that if you take it as a given that there's a genetic component, and the fact that 90% of coin collectors are male, it seems to suggest such. Then there is the fact that most of the males get into it at puberty and get out of it once they discover women and beer and that they don't have discretionary income. Some people come back to it, and those are the ones I think you should target. But the emphasis is on the young collector, the young numismatist. It is misplaced, in that those people who were born to be a collector, the John Kraljevich's and the Dwight Manley's of the world, they're going to collect regardless.

If they find their way to the coins, fine, but they're going to have that gene, and they're going to collect regardless. So, they became interested in coins, and both, to the betterment of the hobby, became successful YNs. But my argument is that not all of them are as noteworthy, whereas if you look at the new people, the interest of people, the people with money spending in the coin shows, it's not 13-year-old boys spending in the coin shows. It's 45-year-old men.

So, there's not a single study anywhere that validates that helping YN people, helping the young numismatists, the young kids, leads to any kind of further growth down the road.

GREG BENNICK: So, you're suggesting that it is essentially as though YN's could theoretically be encouraged as young numismatists and then not really be expected to be seen again for the most part for 30 more years?

DR. LAWRENCE LEE: Yeah, exactly. They'll be self-driven enough. They'll be writing their own books and starting their own companies soon. So, turn them loose. Let nature take its course.

GREG BENNICK: I am sure there will be a lot of opinions on this topic! Especially with the proliferation of YN's recently in the hobby and the professional programs currently working to bring them into the hobby and support them. Now, switching gears a bit: I'm just curious...in terms of a genetic component to collecting, could you speak to that? This genetic idea? I mean, I understand in terms of tradition or standardized societal roles having an influence along the way, especially in regard to you mentioning it could be connected to the acquisition of money. This historically could speak to a sociological component between the role of men in society historically and where our interests are today. Is that what you're talking about? And are there studies that show that?

DR. LAWRENCE LEE: Oh, boy. That gets really tricky because I'm not a geneticist.

GREG BENNICK: Right. Me either!

DR. LAWRENCE LEE: I just know that in autism, there is a total focus on single subjects - and there seems to be a lot of YNs who get into coin collecting because it's a natural outlet for those who have slight autistic tendencies. There's a genetic component. How much it is, I'll leave to other people to say exactly. But at the very least, we should be aware there might be such a thing and we might adjust accordingly, because we teach adults totally differently than we teach young people. And the people we have teaching the Boy Scout badges, and the coins in the classroom are geared towards elementary, non-mature thinking. They don't have the background and experience, not necessarily that it's necessary, but that it helps a lot to imprint it more deeply into the brain, if their interest and background association is there. So that's why there's adult education classes in which you don't do the ABCs because you already expect a certain level of knowledge to have been reached. So that's where we need to put our focus. Teaching at that level and aiming the investment, grading, collecting aspect of the hobby to that age level and degree of maturity.

GREG BENNICK: The combination of science and theory here gives us a lot to talk about, especially because while most people would likely agree that the young numismatist is the future, what you're saying from a scientific approach is essentially show me the money, and show me the studies.

DR. LAWRENCE LEE: Yeah, show me a study. The more information, the better off.

GREG BENNICK: So, with that in mind, I wanted to talk about your taking of an academic approach to the hobby as this certainly ties into that. While I am not a traditional academic, I tend to run in those circles due to research I have been doing for a book on a cultural anthropologist who was rooted in psychology and philosophy. I was really interested when I read your "Rethinking Education" article and how numismatic education might work in the current education system of the United States. I would love to know about that article. Maybe you could tell listeners about that article and then maybe amidst that, we could talk about this idea: did numismatics ever hold a position of revered status in the USA as an academic discipline?

DR. LAWRENCE LEE: Okay. That was a mouthful, but it's a really thoughtful, deep mouthful! It comes down to this question. Why are there no such things as experts from a legal standpoint in numismatics? There are no coin experts in the United States, at least from a degreed standpoint. In other words, there's no degree that you can point to that says, "Oh, I went to this school and got this PhD in this numismatic class. And so, I can now be an expert like this doctor or this lawyer is an expert because of their degree."

In other words, how has numismatics reverted to just being about coin collecting? How did we go backwards on this scale? Because there was a time in the 1860s, just when the observational sciences were first starting to form - geology, archaeology, and numismatics were starting to form into actual academic disciplines - where we could have continued on and become like geology and archaeology today, or like numismatics is in Europe, where it's part of the art or the archaeology department, and it's possible to get a PhD or a Master's in Numismatics in those

academic settings. But not in America. There is not even a single high school class taught in coin collecting that is recognizable on the next level up, except as an elective. Well, instead of the chess club, you joined the coin club, and okay, you get extra credit.

But there's no academic recognition whatsoever. We lost that. We had it. So, my PhD dissertation was about: how did that happen? How did it come about that the status of numismatics fell from an academic discipline down to where it's simply a hobby and the goal of late-night charlatans on TV selling slabbed coins? How did that fall from grace happen? Basically, what I found out was that we, that is, numismatics, did not develop a methodology, a way of studying and presenting our observational data. Our testing methods were never put to academic rigor, or became a discipline per se. And thus, coins became associated with the classics department, the language department.

As Greek and Latin, and the classics, lost stature over the years, then those collections started being sold off. One of the things my PhD did was measure the loss of numismatic standing within the academic world by measuring the selling of various coin collections over time. Without a doubt, between 1880 and 1980, hundreds of colleges, large and small, including every large college in the United States you can name, such as Harvard and Yale, sold portions, if not all of their coin collections. This partially was done for endowments for other uses, but mostly the collections were sold because they no longer met the mission statement academically. Coins could still be in the museum, they could be props within the classic department, but as an academic discipline, they were no more relevant than stuffed fish from the 1930s or whatever.

I note in my PhD dissertation that if you show an American a coin they've never seen before, they ask, "Oh how much is that worth?" If you show the same coin to a European, they will say, "Oh what culture did that come from? Well, how old is that?" The very approach that we take, that the older it is the more it's worth, the American approach is just totally different than the European or Asian approach. There, the reverence or the overall importance is the country and the culture and what's happened through history, rather than a coin's investment potential.

Observationally I think America is the only place where grading companies could have arisen because we look at coins as the two factors in the value of a coin as rarity and condition. The rarity is basically the mintage report and the condition is whatever the slab says on it. That's what determines both the value of the coin in the marketplace, and that's why that's the American approach to it.

GREG BENNICK: What you're suggesting, is that in other cultures their value system is entirely different. We look at a coin and ask, "What it is worth and how can we justify that valuation?" The extension of that thought is, "Thank God there's a slabbing company to tell us how to justify that valuation."

DR. LAWRENCE LEE: You got it.

GREG BENNICK: Somewhere else could see a completely different approach and there might not even need be a slabbing company. Because what slabbing company is going to be able to define the value of the culture that created the numismatic object in the first place? So, with full

disclosure to listeners, I've read Larry's dissertation, his PhD dissertation, and I found it interesting. So, my question to you, Larry is, "Rethinking Education," your dissertation, publicly available currently?

DR. LAWRENCE LEE: Well, it's been publicly available since I published it. And so far, 52 people have looked at it worldwide. Most of those are from an educational perspective where it's seen within the broader context of curriculum and curriculum development. In there, I give my suggestions, say, if you were to have a degree program at the Master's level, what courses would be in it? You would start on how to do research, and you'd ask what's the difference between qualitative and quantitative research? What are the five different methods of qualitative research? You would figure out how to standardize what you're learning within parameters, so you can tell it back to the world in a way the world accepts as an academic discipline. We don't do that in numismatics. We have very few peer-reviewed journals. That's not to knock a lot of the numismatic journals. There are some great journals out there. But not very many are peer-reviewed. And not very many of them are well footnoted, documented, etc. But they are getting better.

GREG BENNICK: Now, your article on this appeared in *The Numismatist*. Is that true?

DR. LAWRENCE LEE: Yes. The January, 2016 issue I believe.

GREG BENNICK: And how did numismatics - the coin hobby - respond to your ideas from that article?

DR. LAWRENCE LEE: I would say a collective yawn would basically cover it.

GREG BENNICK: Why do you think that is?

DR. LAWRENCE LEE: Well, it's pretty obscure stuff in some ways. Who cares about a Master's degree in the discipline of numismatics? It's a very narrow group of people who would care. And the time hasn't been right. And my guess is the time won't be right for what I'm talking about. But *c'est la vie*. I offered my curriculum to one of the grading companies for \$20,000. So, they would have all rights to it to do whatever they wanted with it. But they thought that was way too much money. It was more than a new slabbing machine. And so, we never saw eye-to-eye on that.

GREG BENNICK: As soon as I read your dissertation, I immediately went to the Internet and thought, "Where can I find a Master's program in Numismatics?" I found something, a graduate program in Austria. I wrote to them and asked how I could sign up for this? They replied, "How fluent is your German?" and they told me that unfortunately, I was not a candidate in that case. So, it's too bad, because I bet there are people who would sign up for this without a doubt. I mean, I expect some of the really enthusiastic YN's today certainly would.

DR. LAWRENCE LEE: The strongest interest came from the University of Chicago, which has a history of supporting numismatics as well as a nice collection. A School of Numismatics could be an adjunct college like some of the other colleges they have there. And there is some money

available in Chicago, six-figure money that would go towards establishing a school there. But you're still talking multi-millions of dollars. And then you have the issue that it would require on-campus learning. Students just have to be there. It's like you can't do Auto Mechanics long distance. You can't do numismatic mechanics long distance either. So, the students would need a campus. Then you have dorms and on-site living and that's a whole different can of worms. The academic part of it is easy. The supporting part is hard. So that's why you have to find somebody to team with. At one time, Colorado College had the opportunity to do so. But I they passed as well.

GREG BENNICK: It's interesting because what you've described in the beginning of your answer is a situation where had geology gone the same route, there wouldn't be Geology. There'd simply be rock collecting and we would show up to discuss these objects, and I would have a piece of sulfur and you'd have a piece of granite, and well, we would simply trade rocks.

DR. LAWRENCE LEE: What a great analogy. That's a great example. Not to say that we're quite on the same level because Geology has much more of a chemical component to it. Though numismatics can be quite complex when you throw in history or economics and then you get technology on top of it. It gets pretty interesting and complex quickly. I'm glad to find somebody else as exuberant about the idea as I am, because, it hasn't worked to this point.

GREG BENNICK: Well, when I read your dissertation, I remember being double digit numbers pages into it, and I thought to myself, "The world must see this guy as a happy lunatic." And that's fine, but it struck me as being the type of thing that somebody is going to pick up off a shelf, blow the dust off of someday, and think, "Oh my gosh, why didn't we hear about this a hundred years ago?" And then all of a sudden, it could take its place in the academic canon of classes. It just struck me as just not being timely, yet interesting and potentially really valuable.

DR. LAWRENCE LEE: Well, I'm glad that long after I'm gone, it's going to be a hit.

GREG BENNICK: And maybe this interview is going to be the method and mechanism by which it, it receives the attention due to it.

DR. LAWRENCE LEE: Let's put it all in the time capsule.

GREG BENNICK: That's what we're doing here today. We're planting the seeds for two hundred years for now for when numismatics becomes the equivalent of Geology and rocks and coins can work together.

So, tell me: what are some of the other numismatic educational presentations or angles that you've taken, connecting numismatics and education? Are there favorites of yours and are they documented somewhere where people might view them or read them?

DR. LAWRENCE LEE: I've probably given about 20 different presentations over the years to the ANA, numismatic theaters, Central States, as well as the Nebraska State Historical Society, and the Nevada State Museum. Maybe ten or so are available on the Newman portal. So, you can Google my name, pull them up, and watch my hairline recede and my weight go up over the

years.

GREG BENNICK: Well, I look forward to seeing your presentations for sure. I think that they're going to be great.

DR. LAWRENCE LEE: I will briefly mention a couple of my career highlights starting with *The Coins of Fort Atkinson*. Fort Atkinson was interesting from my perspective because it was furthest West American settlement on the frontier in 1820, as far away as possible in America at the time. It left an archeologically stratified site full of coinage. Besides perhaps Williamsburg, no other site in America has had as many coins recovered from it as Fort Atkinson. Furthermore, these were U.S. soldiers being paid monthly with 50-cent pieces straight from the Philadelphia Mint and each soldier got \$5 a month or 10 coins.

And out there on the prairie, they carved on them. They lost them. They chopped them up. The sutler needed his bit, his one-eighth, so the government would chop the coins right there. The laundry lady got hers. Bits of these coins were found all over the site and surrounding area in its radius, because there was basically a town center of about a mile full of other trappers and tents and travelers. There were people there besides the soldiers.

These people left behind an archeological record and when it was all said and done, there was about 120 coins found archeologically on the site (whether as full coins or as coin bits). 90% of them were Spanish, not American. There was only three copper pieces. Everything was silver. And lots and lots of bits. It was the only time amidst the U.S. government that I am able to find where they actually chopped up their own coinage to pay its soldiers. You had to first pay off the laundress, then you paid the sutler, and whatever was left, you got to keep. But they would chop up pieces to make change.

I gave a presentation on Fort Atkinson. I gave one on a Clark Gruber & Co. \$10 note. I gave one on the secrets of the Denver Mint Archives. I went out to the Denver Mint archives, which are in the Federal Center in Denver. I passed all of the security, and finally got burrowed down in there. My point here is that you could not find the information that's available down there on the internet. People often think, "I'm going to do some research. I'll go on the internet, and see what it says." For instance, and here are two examples. First: pick a date, say 1934, and ask "How many pressmen were operating coin machinery? How much did they make, and what were their names?" You would not find that information on the internet, but it is in the archives.

On the same line of thought, and from a numismatic standpoint, pick the 1937-D nickel, for instance, because that's where the three-legged D comes from. Then ask, "How many obverse dies and how many reverse dies were used that year?" It's all listed right there in the archives but it's not on the internet. No one's dug that up. So, the secret of the Denver Mint Archives, I thought was the one that was supposed to spur people to actually travel somewhere and go through some actual archives.

GREG BENNICK: How did people respond to that presentation?

DR. LAWRENCE LEE: That one, actually, got a little bit of interest from Coin World who did

a little interview on it and they followed up with someone else snooping around there too. They realized what a treasure trove of information is available if you just do a little snooping.

GREG BENNICK: I'm currently working on a book on a cultural anthropologist named Ernest Becker, and if you look online for information on Ernest Becker, you're going to find precious little. There's information, there's stories, and they're the same regurgitated stories over and over and over again, and the same information over and over and over again. But it takes reading his books, and it takes really looking into his history, and it takes going to libraries and looking at archives before the real picture starts unfolding a bit.

While the prevalent information about Becker is out there, the people who actually know the real guy behind the books, well, you can name them on the fingers of one hand. This is because those of us who have done that extra research, the equivalent of going to the Denver Mint to the archives, are few and far between. So, I find your work really interesting.

DR. LAWRENCE LEE: Ernest Becker, you say?

GREG BENNICK: Yes, Ernest Becker. He wrote a book called The Denial of Death, which won the Pulitzer Prize in the early 70s.

DR. LAWRENCE LEE: Remember, I had read The Denial of Death many years ago.

GREG BENNICK: Oh, wow, there you go! It's a perfect example of what we're talking about: that if you're fascinated by a numismatic subject, and this is now directed at our readers: If you're fascinated by a numismatic subject, dive in beyond what you can read on the internet, because there might be far more out there. What exists on the internet is what people have created collectively as the internet, but there are more primary sources of information from a researcher's perspective, which are completely separate from the internet. So, this is a really good call to action on your part. I appreciate it.

DR. LAWRENCE LEE: The secret is that the researcher has more of an understanding of academic discipline and how you review literature. That's one of the standard five approaches to research. Review the literature, a statement of the problem, the collecting the data, the analyzing, and so on. The steps that you go through in the analytic process are ones the researcher knows well. The stronger the numismatic research component is, even though we don't have this formal educational component in numismatics overall, the more we will be moving the hobby forward.

GREG BENNICK: Fantastic. Well, back to a more traditional topic. Can you tell us about your role in the discovery, authentication, and announcement of the missing Walton 1913 Liberty Nickel?

DR. LAWRENCE LEE: I would be happy to. Heritage, when they sold the Walton nickel in 2013, wrote an entire auction catalog on that one coin. I don't know if this is the only time that's been done, but this was the only time I've seen it. They asked me to write up how, as the ANA curator, I got thrust in the middle of this whole thing. Basically, someone came up with the idea (I believe it was Paul Montgomery), to have the reunion of the four known 1913 Nickels,

because the ANS had one, and the Smithsonian had one. We were able to arrange all four of them to be together for the Baltimore ANA show, and then out of the blue, they said, "We'll give a million dollars" if the fifth one shows up.

And by the Law of Unintended Consequences, everybody in the world called the ANA and asked me if their 1913 Nickel was the correct one. And so all day long, I was doing nothing but telling people, "No, no, no, no, no," because, one, I didn't expect anybody to have it, and two, it is diagnostic what to look for: the numeral three on the 1913 in the date is diagnostic. If you know what it's supposed to look like with little balls on the edge of it and everything else then you know what is *not* it. It's likely just pushed metal from the 1912 or a 1910 or whatever they're using as their host coin. It's not the real thing. So, every number three is going to look different. Whereas on the five known ones, all the three's look the same. There are other diagnostic characteristics as well.

This one reporter said, "You need to talk to this family. Because they claim they are the descendants of George Walton who owned the fifth specimen. They claim they're the owner, or they know where it is." To make a long story short, back and forth over the phone, I would work with this descendant, and ask about the 3. She sent me pictures of the 3, and I was shocked. It had the right look. I said, "Well, take a look at the corn on the back," and we worked through some details and when she told me about the corn on the back - the corn kernels on the reverse in the wreath are not high definition as they're supposed to be on genuine coins, they are weak and mushy. She replied, "Oh I can hardly see them, they're really mushy."

This was also promising. There were a couple other diagnostics we went through. Eric Newman had discovered a dot on Liberty's neck behind her head and there's an ejection mark on the edge and there's... realistically there's various diagnostics that you can use to authenticate. Usually, you don't even need to get down to these, such as there being an ejection mark on the side, because the 3 itself is a giveaway that typically isn't right.

So anyway, they came to the Baltimore show with their specimen and after the opening festivities late that first night, we all zipped back down to the convention center at midnight in a caravan of cars. Each car has its own security people, and each one was carrying a different 1913 nickel. Five cars. Five nickels. We all went back there and the experts were all there. My role was to lay out the coins and to get the gloves ready and the lighting and then the experts would come in and do whatever they did to authenticate them and the family was excused at the time. They weren't supposed to be watching it. So, it was really cool to be behind the scenes watching them decide, "Yes... yes... yes...", one at a time and to have them say "Yes this is the fifth nickel."

So, when the family was brought in, they were completely overjoyed to find out that the coin was real. Nine years later, it was sold, and that's brings us back to your original question. The really cool thing is that after all of this, after it was finally sold, after I wrote the article by Larry Lee in the Heritage catalog, the coin was bought by Jeff Garrett and Larry Lee, a Florida coin dealer with the same name as mine. As a result, all of the people who knew I had worked with the Waltons, and the Myers all thought I had bought the coin. So that was pretty fun. I got a lot of mileage out of that coin.

GREG BENNICK: That's really great. I actually interviewed Jeff Garrett and asked him about the purchase of the 1913 Liberty nickel, not connecting it to the Walton specimen when I asked it. So, readers can refer back to the Jeff Garrett interview on the Newman Numismatic Portal for his story of what it was like to make the purchase that day. I love the idea of this clandestine caravan in the middle of the night, with each vehicle carrying a different 1913 Liberty nickel. That's pretty remarkable.

DR. LAWRENCE LEE: Yeah, it's pretty cool.

GREG BENNICK: Very cool, indeed. So, switching from a famous coin, to a famous name: did you know John J. Ford Jr.? And if so, what connection did you have with him?

DR. LAWRENCE LEE: I grew up in Colorado and that's how I got interested and into the Denver Mint. I got interested in the private gold coin minters of the Gold Rush era: Clark, Clark & Gruber, Dr. John Parsons, J.J. Conway, and Denver City Assay. I wrote an article called "Dr. Mummy, the G-Man and the J.J. Conway Dies." These were the dies that struck the J.J. Conway coins, of which there's maybe a total of 15 known (I will come back to that in a second). These dies were in the Colorado State Historical Society. I went down to the museum, and into the archives. I found the dies and wrote them up and described how they'd gotten discovered in a guy's attic. It was a really great story. I traced the dies all the way back to 1861.

I wrote this up and published it. I sent it in to *The Numismatist* and amazingly it won an award. I didn't even know I was in the running for it. It was the Olga Raymond Memorial Award, which was sponsored by John J. Ford. It was given by him, and at his direction, mostly to people writing about territorial gold pieces. So here I was writing about something that wasn't entirely new but this aspect of it was original. No one had written this up: how the government tried to seize the dies because they said they were counterfeit.

As a result of all of this, John began corresponding with me. At this point I had not yet met him, but he would send me gifts. He sent me the Henry Clifford catalog of territorial gold pieces. Interestingly (and this is the point I'm still intending to come back to), most of the pieces in there from Colorado were purchased by one man, Frederick Mayer, who I later worked for when I became his private curator. So, all the coins in this particular catalog from Colorado that John had sent me, I was later able to be involved with when I became the curator for Dr. Mayer. We'll get to that story.

I almost felt like Ford was preparing me in a way, to help him with gold ingots and selling them and authenticating them. I became interested in the Conway pieces because there's like only 15 Conway pieces known in denominations of \$2½, \$5 and \$10. There's only three \$10's known. Two of them are in Smithsonian. And the third one, that \$10 as well as two of the five known \$5 gold pieces (as well as a lump of gold, which consisted of two melted \$2 ½'s and two melted \$5 gold pieces, all found together at Fort Union, New Mexico) were all struck in 1861. John Ford told me a really good story of how they were found. Basically, they were discovered and taken illegally on federal land because Fort Union, was a federal monument.

In 1861, the only time the Civil War broached Colorado was when General Shelby and his troops decided to come up from Texas and attempt to seize the Colorado gold fields since a lot of the gold miners were Southern sympathizers who had mined in Georgia in the Georgia gold strike. When the Colorado strike happened, half of ~~the~~, all the miners out there were Southern sympathizers.

Gen. Shelby thought he would have a groundswell of help there. They sent a contingent, a fairly large contingent, of Confederate soldiers north to New Mexico. At Glorieta Pass, which is at the border of Colorado and New Mexico, they had a battle in the mountains between the Union forces and the Colorado Volunteers who rushed down in the dead of winter to fight the rebels coming up to seize the gold fields and specifically, the Clark Gruber mint in Denver. The battle was won, and the Union troops settled down at Fort Union and it was at the sutler store in Fort Union where the Conway coins were found: some soldier in the Colorado First Volunteers had carried them all the way from the mining town of Parkville. These Conway coins later found their way into Frederick Mayer's collection, who I'm still intending to talk about.

John Ford gave me the background story. He told me the people who dug the coins up at Ft. Union were a survivalist gang who lived in the mountains of Colorado and were not to be messed with. They were probably guilty of various crimes but I foolishly tried to contact them. I drove up this encampment in Colorado and was told, "No further" and "Go away."

So, I didn't really get to know more about the story of how they actually found the coins. But the story was all the Conway coins were found in the sutler store in Fort Union, New Mexico, as a result of the civil war encroaching in Colorado. That's a pretty good story.

GREG BENNICK: I agree!

DR. LAWRENCE LEE: Really cool thing is that John Ford sold these coins to Harry Clifford. Clifford sold them in auction, and they were bought at auction by Frederick Mayer who ~~then~~ later hired me to be his personal curator. So, for three years, I developed an exhibit of his personal Colorado gold, his territorial exhibit collection. It consisted of a complete set of everything. It included a lot of pattern coins from Conway, but he also had Conway's \$2 ½, \$5, \$10. He had Parsons coins, including the \$2 ½ and the \$5 as well as the Parsons mint over strikes, when they set up the press on a dime and some other coin. He had all the Denver City Assay patterns. There was only one DCA token he didn't own and those are a great story. They've been a subject of the entire book themselves because of Winslow J. Howard, the guy who engraved and struck them.

Anyway, they all ended up in Frederick Mayer's collection. Mayer made his fortune in the oil business and for many years was the richest man in Colorado. He wanted me to make a personal museum exhibit case in his downtown Denver home. He owned the only private home in downtown Denver and he built it for five million dollars. It was multi-story and was really cool. He had one gallery of nothing but Spanish colonial artwork and then on the top floor he'd made this one long hallway and it had five, wall-mounted exhibit cases. Two of the exhibit cases held Clark Gruber pieces. One was Conway, one was Dr Parsons and the other was Denver City Assay.

Now, John Ford told me about Dr. Parsons and I did a lot of research on both Dr. Parsons and the Clark Gruber guys after they sold their coins and what happened to them. That is all unpublished research. I'd love to have time in my life to show that Parsons struck coins in 1862 for sure, not just 1861. No one knows that. He later became even more famous as an explorer in Utah, than he was in Colorado.

But anyway, Ford told me that John Parsons was an abortionist, a medical doctor, and that Parsons had had to flee Quincy, Illinois, because of an abortion he performed. That's how he came to Colorado. I don't know that to be 100% true. But it shows the kind of information that Ford had in his file.

To add to the John Ford story: when I did my last book on the Indian peace medals of the Denver Museum of Nature and Science, many of those medals were sold to Francis Crane by John Ford. Crane owned 200 and some Indian peace medals, many sold to him by John Ford who kept all of their correspondence. And so about three years ago, I was able to view all this correspondence between these two gentlemen over Indian peace medals. Evidently, Ford sold Crane a medal that turned out to be fake and Crane sent it back and they argued but Ford always said that Crane was such a gentleman about it that he couldn't hold a grudge. Which was somewhat unlike Ford's general reputation.

All of this is an insight into someone (Ford) who I always thought was wanting me to help him out but, maybe he might have seen what an idiot I was and decided to use me for his own purposes.

GREG BENNICK: I love that the culmination of this brilliant story of historical research, experience and analysis is you declaring yourself to be an idiot. That is very funny. Now, you'd mentioned in your answer, of course, being a private curator. I was wondering if you'd talk about - and this is almost more from a philosophical standpoint - tell me about the ethical considerations which arise when combining the roles of collector, dealer, and curator. Could you explain the differences between those three roles?

DR. LAWRENCE LEE: Well, I alluded to it earlier in that I thought genetics causes collectors and all collectors have within them a desire to organize and to care for these objects. So that's what the professional curator does. A collector is someone on the road to becoming a museum curator; he just privately curates his own collection.

A museum curator cares for somebody else's collection. Technically the same ethics that apply to the museum curator, you would want to apply to your own collection. You would want to have a collecting philosophy, for instance. You can't collect every coin out there. You just can't. You have to be focused and you have to decide what do I really want? What am I studying? What is the end goal?

Every single museum in America could potentially have coins in it and also people ~~who~~ give them coins all the time, but they ultimately might not need them. Perhaps they're not specifically

a coin museum. It's not their function or in their mission statement. Their function is the history of Washington County or the history of Fort Wayne or whatever.

In that case, it would be more important to have the local trade tokens from your geographic region in there and you should have a much stronger collection of the trade tokens from your city than showcasing random steel pennies simply because somebody thought they were important and gave them to you.

GREG BENNICK: Speaking to different folks for this interview series people have alluded to the conflict which can develop between being a curator, and if you can still be a collector? Or if you're a collector, can you desire to be a dealer if your goal is to sell things, not keep them, like a collector does.

DR. LAWRENCE LEE: It is an interesting thing. And the ethics are a little mushy. I don't consider myself a coin dealer, but I sell coins and I buy coins. In the case of curation though, whosever collection I'm caring for, and this is the difference: I'm ethically bound to that collection. My point is that the individual collector should have the same approaches. Thoughts on deaccession, or how do you get rid of your extras? Organization and a system for that. I always want to organize every single coin.

GREG BENNICK: Well, I had one more question for you. I was wondering if you could tell us about the Henderson Supper Club or if this is a situation where if you tell me, since it's seemingly top secret, that you'd then have to kill me.

DR. LAWRENCE LEE: What you're referring to is the Bill Henderson Supper Club. ~~and~~ Bill Henderson was the mayor of Colorado Springs who was instrumental in getting the ANA to move there. This club meets once a month at a nice restaurant where they have a private room. First there's the libations and then there's the dinner. And then there's show and tell, which alternates each month with a different moderator.

The subjects for show and tell are nothing very specific. It'll be something generic like "wings over America" or something. And as is often true at clubs there's a hundred different interpretations. Everyone gets five minutes to present their pieces. It's semi-secret, by invitation only, with the only rule being, no rules.

Basically, the Henderson Club draws its membership from Front Range, which is the area including Boulder, Denver, and Colorado Springs. They keep the membership at 18 members. If someone drops off or drops dead, they nominate a new member and that person goes through a nominating process. All of the current members are aware of the E-Sylum and the Newman Numismatic Portal. Ed Rochette was a longtime member. He was the longtime director of the ANA, and a prolific author. George Fisher taught the class on Chinese coins for many years at the ANA summer seminar. Bill Spangler, who literally wrote the book on Turkoman coins. Dick Horst and Larry Johnson had Gresham's Law, so they had great tokens and medals.

These people might all be familiar and they all were members of the Henderson Supper Club. I'm honored to be one of their members. It has been one of the highlights of my career.

There's one other thing I want to add if I could would be my plans for future research.

GREG BENNICK: Yes. Please do. Tell us.

DR. LAWRENCE LEE: I have four projects going on. One is to finish the Colorado book as there's so much on Colorado gold coins I haven't yet published and that is new to the field. This would be in conjunction with the Frederick Mayer collection. I'd like to still do that.

My current interest is Indian peace medals and I am working in conjunction with the Denver Museum. We think we have the earliest Indian peace medal issued in the northern hemisphere. It is dated 1655. That is way, way, way, way, way, way early.

Then we also have a third project I'm doing. There's an "*al merito*" Indian peace medal that is ascribed to an archaeological dig in Nebraska. This single site in Nebraska was the source of seven different Indian peace medals, which to my knowledge is the highest number of Indian peace medals from any single site. But one medal that's traditionally ascribed to this site, a Spanish "for merit" or "*al merito*" medal, didn't come from that site at all, despite all the literature. It's more likely, like the Walton nickel, sitting in a home in a small town in Nebraska waiting to be discovered. That's a good story.

My last project is that I am writing my third book, this on *Numismatic Theology*. What is numismatic theology, pray tell? You'll have to read the book to find out, but it is basically an extension of the idea of "Biblical coins."

GREG BENNICK: This interview has been great. We covered so many ideas and aspects of collecting and curation which don't often make it to the forefront. I'm really happy with it. If readers are interested in this interview, please check out my others. What makes this interview series really fascinating to me is that each of the people I've talked to comes to numismatics with a different perspective, a different philosophy, a different idea, and certainly a different background. There's really something here for everyone to discover.

As more of these interviews go up, be sure to check the Newman Numismatic Portal and the page they have specified for the interview series. You're going to find a breadth of information and different perspectives on numismatics and truly fascinating stories of the people involved in it all. I really appreciate your time today, Larry. This has been fun.

DR. LAWRENCE LEE: Thank you, Greg. I really appreciate you doing this series. It's another benefit of Eric's long-term thinking and I am sure he too would appreciate what you're doing.

INTERVIEWERS NOTE: I highly recommend, for anyone interested in the concept of numismatic archeology or how coins can inform us about the past, Dr. Lee's most excellent and award-winning book, The Coins of Fort Atkinson: A Study in Numismatic Archeology. The 2nd edition, published in 2015, is very interesting and will certainly offer a new perspective as you explore its ideas and analysis of history. You can read more about the book through the E-Sylum review here: https://www.coinbooks.org/esylum_v18n10a04.html